

Peace Among the Peoples
An Ecumenical Peace Conference on Overcoming the Spirit, Logic and Practice of Violence
Hosted July 28-31, 2010, by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, Indiana, USA

by John Bender

Thirty Christian faith traditions share the peace

ELKHART, Indiana—Jamal, a Muslim refugee from Zanzibar, and Matthew, a Jew, got acquainted as their children played in a neighborhood parkette in Canada's largest city, Toronto. Learning of Jamal's computer skills, Matthew found him a job.

Later, as the events of September 11, 2001, unfolded, Jamal came to Matthew's house, shaken. "I'm so sorry, but I don't know who to say sorry to." Matthew invited Jamal's family to share dinner with them.

The relationship of these neighbors represents "a testimony to the possibility of peace among peoples," said Mary Jo Leddy, addressing the opening worship of an ecumenical peace conference, "Peace Among the Peoples," July 28–31.

At the same time, the U.S. government's response to 9/11 illustrates "the near impossibility of such peace in an age of empire violence," Leddy said. For almost 20 years, this Catholic writer, speaker, theologian and social activist has lived with and directed the Romero House Community for Refugees, people living in four small houses in Toronto.

The conference, hosted by Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary, Elkhart, IN, had more than 20 co-sponsors and just over 200 registrants, mostly from the U.S., but also Canada, Europe and Australia, representing Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Protestant and Free Church faith traditions.

Christians have difficulty in building peace because they are reluctant to stand with the peoples of the world who are oppressed and impoverished by empire, Leddy said, including her own country, "a colony of empire."

The language of empire surfaced a number of times during the conference, but was not systematically defined beyond examples of the rise, over-extension and fall of empires throughout history, such as Roman, Carolingian and Holy Roman empires. These empires used political, economic and military means to dominate other peoples or nations.

As an empire declines it defines itself increasingly by what it is against, rather than what it is for, creating a great need for enemies, Leddy said. It loses sight of its founding vision.

For Christians, "Our daily summons is to build peace among the people in our home, city, country and universe," Leddy said. Christians are summoned "to preach with our lives the good news that we can, should, must love our enemies. If we simply hate our enemies, we become like them."

Leddy told of an ultimately successful effort in her neighborhood to prevent an office tower from being built. The tower would have blocked any sunshine from reaching the parkette. The community acted like termites, persisting in taking small bites from structure of empire until it fell. Calling conferees her "fellow termites," she blessed them, saying, "May you chomp on with great cheerfulness."

Peace Among the Peoples has been part of a decade-long initiative of the World Council of Churches to help people overcome the spirit, logic and practice of violence. From May 17–25, 2011, the WCC will

convene a worldwide gathering, the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, in Kingston, Jamaica, as a “harvest festival” to celebrate the achievements of the Decade to Overcome Violence which began in 2001.

The Elkhart gathering uniquely drew together academics and grassroots people to focus on how their churches’ theologies reflect and promote peace and justice. The conference was planned under the auspices of the Institute of Mennonite Studies, the research arm of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary.

Rita Nakashima Brock and Fr. Philip LeMasters addressed the opening plenary on “Alternative Approaches to Christians and War.” Brock is founding co-director of the Faith Voices for the Common Good and Fr. LeMasters teaches at McMurry University, Abilene, Texas.

Brock, co-author of *Saving Paradise*, used visuals to show the church’s early experience of Jesus as a living presence in a vibrant world through art, ritual and devotional practices. During the Carolingian Empire under Constantine the focus shifted to depict a dead Jesus and a stern God who punishes us.

The church, through Christian conquest, lost its spiritual understanding of paradise here and now, Brock said. Instead, the church developed theologies of redemptive violence and turned to holy war, including the Crusades.

Love for the earth calls for a theology of redemptive beauty, Brock said. Our invitation to God’s table includes addressing the economic disparity in the body by attending to the needs of the poor. It calls for lifting up beauty. Christianity is life-affirming, she said; the church, the garden of God on earth, represents paradise in this world.

Brock also addressed moral injury experienced by those directly involved in killing in war. The Western Christian church has an important ministry to recover from the Eastern Orthodox church, she said, in reclaiming the practice of penance, a ritual of forgiveness for the damaging spiritual consequences of killing those who bear the image of God.

Fr. LeMasters said Orthodoxy views war as always a tragic, broken endeavor, “but a sometimes necessary evil for the defense of justice and freedom. The only normative ideal, however, is that of peace.” We are called, he said, “to participate in the peace of heaven even as we live on the earth.”

The Orthodox Church prays for peace for the whole world and for the armed forces of our nations, he said. “We have saints who were lifelong pacifists and saints who were great military leaders. We do not have the precise moral categories about war which are characteristic of western Christianity. The focus of the Orthodox is on the salvation of persons by their growth in holiness and union with the Holy Trinity.”

Recognizing that at the root the Orthodox stance on violence is commitment to a dynamic praxis of peace, LeMasters said in the Eastern church “some will fight in those wars, even as they mourn the tragic necessity of bloodshed. They fall short of the nonresistant way of Christ, and the Church will provide the spiritual therapies necessary for their healing. Others grow in holiness to the point that their lives become epiphanies of the selfless love of Christ in turning the other cheek. Their prophetic witness is a foretaste of the Kingdom of Heaven, and reminds those who take up arms of the corruption of a world which has not yet fully embraced the peace of God.”

Jarrod McKenna, part of the Anabaptist Network of Australia, described the Peace Tree Community he is part of in Perth, Australia. The community runs a peacemaking program in the public schools, reclaims vacant city blocks for permaculture gardens, uses nonviolent means to confront the military, welcomes the downtrodden and homeless to their homes, and takes the message of Jesus to those stripped of their

power in prison.

McKenna said he and Teresa, his wife, and son are part of “a support group of sinners anonymous” and “recovering consumers” who pray and act to “be about the extraordinarily beautiful business of living God’s love.” One of the group’s actions has been to plant vines and fig trees on military bases, thereby planting a seed for the transformation of the military into an Earth Defense Force.

Linda Gehman Peachey addressed sexual violation, intimate partner abuse and abuse of children. It is a peace issue, she said, in that the church’s words and deeds must become consistent. Attention must be paid to those hurt and impoverished by individuals and systems. The capacity to relate to others in love depends on how we view God. Do we make God look like a dominating Caesar, or do we see God’s image created equally in male and female?

Gehman Peachey directs the Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Women’s Advocacy Program, encouraging mutuality among women and men and provides resources that address sexism, violence and abuse in families and communities. Tragically, she said, she encounters many women who sincerely love the church but do not see their needs, perspectives and wisdom taken seriously.

Theologian and author Brian McLaren used the metaphor of story to show what peacemaking might look like in the future. He shared the panel with Paul Alexander, co-founder of Pentecostals and Charismatics for Peace. Alexander led a group of evangelical Christians to wrestle with faith in peacemaking through a visit with Christians and others in Israel and Palestine.

McLaren said to change a society, tell a story that does not try to gain peace through domination, revolution, purification (identifying, blaming, shaming and excluding a dangerous minority), victimization, isolation and accumulation. Jesus came with an alternative story—the good news of the kingdom of God. Jesus calls us, he said, “to make a commitment to an alternative way of life.”

Stanley Hauerwas, Duke University, and Gerard Powers, University of Notre Dame, dealt with “Just War and Pacifism in Dialogue.” Powers focused on how the Catholic bishops in the United States “use the just war tradition to constrain strong tendencies in U.S. foreign policy toward a muscular unilateralism while pressing a broader ethic of peacebuilding that calls for much more responsible U.S. engagement for the global common good.”

Hauerwas said Christian realism requires the disavowal of war. “Christians do not disavow war because it is often so horrible, but because war, in spite of its horror, or perhaps because it is so horrible, can be so morally compelling. This is why the church does not have an alternative to war, but rather the church is the alternative to war.”

Guillermo Kerber, a staff member of the World Council of Churches, Geneva, Switzerland, and Kent Yoder, a recent graduate of Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary and a former staff member of the Decade to Overcome Violence, reported on the decade’s impact and follow-up at the International Peace Convocation in Jamaica.

The question of war and peace has been present in the WCC deliberations since its formation in 1948. Then the question was considered in WCC assemblies mainly in terms of international conflicts between sovereign states, Kerber said.

In those early years WCC members affirmed “war is contrary to the will of God” and “peace requires attack on the causes of conflict between the powers,” but they could not agree on the question posed by World War II, “Can war now be an act of justice?”

The Decade to Overcome Violence was not intended to be a WCC program nor a WCC Geneva-based initiative, Kerber said, but included other churches, councils of churches and ecumenical organizations. Regional attention over the decade has been focused in Palestine and Israel, Africa, the U.S., Asia, Latin America, Europe, the Pacific Islands, and the Caribbean. The 2010 focus again highlights Africa, to include an International Day of Prayer for Peace, 21 September 2010.

The programme executive of the WCC International Affairs, Peace and Human Security Team said through the work of the decade it became clear that “only a holistic approach can effectively respond to the challenges posed by the diverse manifestations of violence.” And, “Churches are among those best placed to respond in a comprehensive way because of their wide range of action, from the groups, congregations, parishes at the local level to the advocacy work at the governmental and intergovernmental levels.”

The Convocation in Jamaica will be a “harvest festival” to celebrate the achievements of the past decade, Kerber said. The harvest festival will revolve around four themes: Peace in the community, Peace with the earth, Peace in the marketplace, and Peace among the peoples. Of the latter theme, he said, “We cannot talk about peace among the peoples without tackling domestic violence, violence against women and children, racism, ethnic violence, poverty and violence against the whole creation.”

The WCC is working on a statement that would outline a more comprehensive and biblical notion of peace, one that goes beyond a classical and limited understanding of peacebuilding. It is this biblical and theological approach that has led toward an Ecumenical Declaration on Just Peace, Kerber said.

Just Peace can be understood as a multifaceted, collective and dynamic process of ensuring that human beings are free from fear and from want, are overcoming enmity, exclusion and oppression and are establishing conditions for right relationships that include the most vulnerable and respect the integrity of creation.

Conferees were saddened at the news of the death of Church of the Brethren peacemaker and activist Arthur G. Gish. Gish died in a farming accident, July 28, on their farm near Athens, Ohio. Art and Peggy were organic farmers and long-time workers for peace, including with Christian Peacemaker Teams. In one of his writings Art said, “The early Brethren understood that a Christian stands over against the world. To be at peace with God means that one is in conflict with the world.”

As part of one evening conferees enjoyed a banquet and the satiric comedy troupe, Ted and Company, with a new production, “I’d Like to Buy An Enemy.”

Worship, planned by local pastors and held in Elkhart churches, framed the conference with evening services in their congregations. Music by organ, choir and congregational singing; scripture readings; prayers; passing the peace and sermons proved a refreshing ecumenical celebration of sharing God’s peace. Offerings taken at each worship service went toward support of the 2011 Convocation.

In addition to Mary Jo Leddy, other evening preachers were Itonde Kakoma, an assistant program coordinator for the Conflict Resolution Program of the Carter Center in Atlanta, Ga., at First Presbyterian Church; Rev. Bogdan Bucur, a native of Romania and now assistant professor at Duquesne University teaching Reception History, recently ordained as priest in the Orthodox Church related to the See of Antioch, at St. Vincent De Paul Catholic Church; and Andre Gingerich Stoner, director of Interchurch Relations for Mennonite Church USA and pastoral team member at Kern Road Mennonite Church, South Bend, Ind., at St. James AME Church.

Dick Hamm, director of Christian Churches Together, served as moderator of the large group discernment sessions. He spoke of a consensus that this was “an outstanding conference” where we “were called into

the presence of the Spirit.”

Conferees affirmed plans for a continuation committee to consider the findings, recommendation and next steps. That ecumenical committee of 12 will work at ways they can support the 2011 Peace Convocation, consider the creation of a peace center and review the potential for a global peace network. The peace center would essentially be a staff person to encourage collaboration within the church-based peace movement in North America. The global network would build on the work of the past decade in Christian peacemaking to share resources, best practices and mobilize on specific issues.

Conference costs were covered by registration fees, support from the 20 sponsors, time-allotted staff work from supporting institutions and grants from the Church of the Brethren, Kroc Institute for International Peace, Mennonite Central Committee International, and the National Council of Churches.

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Concurrent sessions at the ecumenical peace conference of The Decade to Overcome Violence, included Decade of Churches in Solidarity with Women (Gail Allen), Eucharist and Peacemaking (Weldon Nisly and Alex Patico), Forgiveness, Reconciliation and Accountability (Rodney Peterson, Itonde Kakoma, Michael Eastridge, and Dan Philpott),

Also, Just Peacemaking (Glen Stassen and Ted Koontz), Just Policing (Gerald Schlabach and Andy Alexis-Baker), Military Chaplaincy (Herm Keizer and Andre Gingerich Stoner), Nationalism and Christian Peace Witness (Craig Watts and Richard Hughes), Nuclear Weapons (Margaret Pfeil and Tyler Wigg-Stevenson), Responsibility to Protect (Ernie Regehr and Carol Rose), and Selective Conscientious Objection (Mark Johnson and Logan Laituri).

Also, Christian Understanding of War in an Age of Terror(ism): NCCC study document (Michael Trice and Rich Meyer), Global Ecumenical Peace Network (Tim Seidel and Focus Group), North American Ecumenical Peace Center (Alex Patico), Theological Dialogue on Peace (John Rempel), Report from the Truth Commission on Conscience in War (Rita Nakashima Brock), Responses to the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation Just Peace Declaration (Scott Holland), and U.S. Nuclear Weapons: Are Churches Making a Difference? (David Culp and Jonathan Frerichs).

Plenary presentations, reports from concurrent sessions and other materials are being reviewed for publication. For more information on the conference see www.peace2010.net. For more information on the International Ecumenical Peace Convocation, “Glory to God and Peace on Earth,” see www.overcomingviolence.org.

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John Bender, Elkhart, IN, retired in January 2007 from gainful employment as a writer-editor with North American church agencies. In 2010 he completed a labor of love as editor of the 75th anniversary volume of Cassel Mennonite Church, the rural congregation in Ontario, Canada, in which he grew up.

Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminary is a seminary of Mennonite Church Canada and Mennonite Church USA, educating followers of Jesus Christ to be leaders for God’s reconciling mission in the world. Begun in 1945 and 1946, the two seminaries that formed AMBS began their association at 3003 Benham Avenue, Elkhart, IN, in 1958. www.ambs.edu
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